4-30-2020

The Vascik Family Legacy

Sam Leicht

University of Portland

The Vascik Family Legacy

Sam Leicht

ENG 499: Senior Capstone Project

Dr. Molly Hiro

30 April 2020

His birthday fell on Easter this year. Normally, my grandma would've dragged him to St. Catherine's for morning mass. She would've made her green bean casserole the night before, maybe, or a red Jell-O dessert with little bits of fruit mixed in. Papa would've eaten it all (well, maybe he would've picked the fruit out and put it in his napkin, but that wasn't anybody's business). He would've asked for seconds of the Jell-O, and she would've smiled and given him just a little less than he asked for. *Remember you're watching your sugar, Clem.* He would've kissed her on the cheek and smiled, but maybe that was only to throw her off-course so he could sneak some more whipped cream from the can when she turned her back to answer the ringing phone in the kitchen. It was one of those old phones, the ones that are attached to the wall with the curly wire that doesn't let you move very far. *Oh, hi Karen, thanks for calling…Happy Easter to you too! Did the Easter Bunny pay you all a visit?…Oh good…Yes, I'll put Dad on the line so the kids can sing "Happy Birthday" to him once he finishes up eating…*By the time she'd turn around, any red left on his plate would've been hidden by a white pillowy mountain of Reddi-wip, and before she could protest, he would've had a spoonful in his mouth already anyway. She'd narrow her eyes at him, but she wouldn't have said anything out loud. She was never one to lose her composure, but especially not over the phone. Well, maybe she would've scolded him a little, under her breath, bringing a delicate hand up to quietly cover the receiver. Maybe not. But the one thing she definitely would've done is roll the pointed end of the holy palm she got from church a week ago that was stuck to the side of the fridge, feeling its grooves absentmindedly between her finger and her thumb, thinking about him, worrying about how much coffee cake he'd had that morning already and how she really needs to figure out how to get on Google to find some healthier recipes to make because his doctor seemed pretty serious about that whole *cut back on sweets* thing. Yes, she definitely would've done that. And then she

would've felt guilty that the end of the palm was all curly now, like, somehow, Jesus preferred uncurled palms be waved at him when he came into town on a donkey that day long ago, and that now it was just going to dry out and stay like that all year, and that she has to wait for next Palm Sunday before she can get a fresh one. And there it would remain, curly and imperfect and staring her straight in the face every time she walked into the kitchen for a whole 358 days, coiling in on itself as the crisp green dried and turned to a flaky, feeble brown.

Normally, that's what would've happened. But there was nothing normal about this year.

This year, my grandfather spent his 89th birthday in a great deal of pain. A lifelong smoker, Clem, or "Papa" Clem, as we called him, was fighting throat cancer and had developed COPD. He ate his Easter/birthday dinner through a feeding tube while reading *The Toledo Blade* with his gold-colored magnifying glass. His nose made a whispering sound every time he exhaled, as he had been tethered to an oxygen tank since January. And while he didn't know it at the time, people he'd never meet, strangers clear across the world in Wuhan, China were being infected with a devastating new strain of coronavirus and, like him, were struggling to breathe, loosing oxygen—dying. On January 20, 2020, the first confirmed case of COVID-19—the illness caused by the virus—was detected in the United States (Holshue et al. 929). Since then, it has spread rapidly and claimed thousands of lives, shutting down society as we know it in its wake. Schools, non-essential businesses, and public areas have been closed until further notice. For Papa Clem, that means no more trips to the hospital for PET scans to see where the cancer has spread. In other words, it means he doesn't know how much longer he has to live, but he knows it isn't long.

But Karen did indeed call, like she and the rest of the kids and their kids and their kids' kids did every year. There was no green palm on the fridge yet, just the old one from last year. It

sat there, sturdily hung over the living room clock, woven into the shape of a cross and disintegrating every day. It happened slowly—too slowly for most people to detect. But Grandma could notice the changes happening if she looked closely at it, which is why she rarely did. She walked in from the bedroom when she heard the kitchen phone ring. *Hello?...Oh Karen, hello dear, how are you doing?...Oh, we're doing fine ove*—and then she brought her left hand up to cover the receiver. It wasn't to reprimand her husband about his sweet tooth, but to spare Karen the heartache of having to hear her father's coughs, which were spilling in from the other room.

That week, he was having more fits than ever. The sounds of his hacking and gasping always came slowly at first, but the more he'd try to fight it, the more aggressive it'd become. What was at first a dripping became a trickle and then a small stream, and then with enough momentum, it morphed into a river with enough force to hurl boulders. It flooded into every room, even with the doors closed. Like the cancer, the coughing was a mean thing. It didn't care. It got everywhere, even in places you didn't know were there before. The boulders swept up in the current shook the foundation of the house like thunder, and every time it happened, it made her stomach sink. She forced her shoulders back, moved the phone up to her ear again. *You know, dear, maybe it would be better if I called you back after supper.* Before Karen could reply, she hung up the phone. She was never one to lose her composure.

•

My father's parents had both passed away by the time I was born, and so my mother's father, Clem Vascik, was the only grandfather I'd ever known. He rarely, if ever, talked about himself; but as a kid, I didn't pay much attention. He was more like a mythical creature to me than a real human being. For starters, I was convinced he could talk to animals. My sister and I

would spend entire afternoons in his backyard talking to them together, but they never talked back to me. He gave names to each of the squirrels who regularly visited the house, feeding them by hand, letting them crawl up on his arm. One particularly plump gray squirrel would let himself inside when the door was left open, hoping his friend Clem would be there to give him more food. He knew each of the cardinals and robins by name, too, but they weren't as friendly as the squirrels. He laid out traps for opossums, raccoons, and whatever other little creatures could sneak under the fence so he could meet them, feed them, and set them free.

But like a lot of kids, I can't say I ever thought about the fact that he, too, was once a kid who did the same things I did—went to school, had friends, had siblings or parents. And the older I became, the more I realized I didn't know hardly anything about him. It seemed like there were a million old photos of my grandma's family lying around, as well as stories I would regularly hear about their lives. But Papa Clem and his family were a mystery to me, and the more I realized how little I knew, the more fascinated I became with trying to get some answers. Today, I know significantly more about his family tree than I did when I began my research in 7th grade; however, the project is still ongoing and is very much still not complete. More than eight years have elapsed between my first trip to Ellis Island when I first found Papa's father's ship manifest—my first big discovery—to this very afternoon in which I received photos via email that I had never seen of that same man's hometown. It would be an understatement to say that this project has been frustrating, and I cannot count the number of times I found myself wondering why I was undertaking it at all. But despite the dead ends, the long nights and early mornings, and the money spent on train and plane tickets, researching his family tree has turned out to be one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. It has taken me across the world, led

me to people I never thought I'd meet, and introduced me to stories of incredible resilience, determination, and sacrifice which I hope I can, at least in part, preserve for future generations.

•

When I arrived to University of Portland's campus in 2016 as a first-year student, I was overwhelmed by the amount of clubs and programs I could join. However, I remember leaving the Student Activities Fair certain that there was one thing I wanted to do before I graduated: study abroad. I really didn't care where I went—I just wanted to leave the U.S. and see what life was like elsewhere. I wanted to meet interesting people and eat new kinds of food, see castles and museums and backpack and explore. I applied and was accepted to the program in Galway, Ireland and lived there in 2018, the Spring of my sophomore year.

Honestly, I didn't think travelling to Slovakia during my stay in Ireland was going to be feasible. I didn't think I had the time or the money, I didn't know how to speak any German or Slovak, and, if I were going to do any Vascik family research while I was there, it would make most sense to go alone. I worried about not being able to communicate, definitely, but mostly I worried about being disappointed by what I set out to find. Despite all my concerns, I held my breath and clicked "Book" on the cheapest airline ticket I could find from Dublin to Bratislava in early April. And before I knew it, it was happening.

•

I wasn't scared when I boarded the plane in Dublin. I wasn't scared when we were in the air, or when we hit turbulence and the flight attendant mumbled something over the intercom in some Eastern-bloc-sounding language that was unidentifiable to me, and then again in German which—though I could at least identify it as such—was no more helpful to me. *What the hell was that?* Was it Polish? My eyelids were heavy from the Dramamine I had taken a half hour prior

and I could feel myself falling asleep. *Motion sickness*, I thought. *My mom gets motion sick. A Vascik family trait, maybe?* I smiled, looked out the window, and tried to listen to the conversations around me. They were muddled by the cabin noise but still audible, though I had no idea what anybody was saying. It all just sounded like a strange version of Polish. *Could it be?* I thought back to playdates an old childhood friend whose family had the POLVISION TV news station playing on every television in every room in what seemed like a never-ending loop. And to her birthdays, where everyone in attendance except my sister and I knew the words to "Happy Birthday" in Polish. Well, we knew the *Sto lat!* part well enough. How could we not? On our birthday, my babysitter would sing it to us, hoping we would learn a little bit of the language—though the only bits that stuck were the melody and those two words. Lots of sweet memories came rushing back. Maybe they were getting knocked loose by the shaking wall of the plane where my head was resting.

Then I remembered where I was.

I had fallen asleep, I guess. I was on a plane headed to Bratislava.

•

When we landed and I began to walk through the airport, for the first time during the journey, I was scared. I was looking for some kind of touchstone, some kind of reminder of the world I knew. I blindly followed the other people on my flight to what turned out to be the bus station, but then realized I didn't really know where I was going. I didn't have a reservation at a hostel, I couldn't make sense of any of the maps or ticketing machines to get into the city, and I couldn't ask anyone for help. *Why did I even come here? Was this all a mistake?*

No. I stopped my mind in its tracks. I couldn't back out now.

I used my Google Translate and Google Maps apps to find a bus headed to the city center, and I got off at a stop near the middle of Bratislava. It was a sunny afternoon, nearly 80 degrees, and I was still in my jeans and wool sweater that had been keeping me warm in rainy Ireland earlier that day. In the distance, I swear I could hear the *thump-thump-thump* of an upright bass playing a polka tune. I didn't want to follow it at first; I wanted to find a bathroom and change into my t-shirt, and maybe find a way to cut the pants off my jeans to turn them into shorts. But I followed it, winding through narrow streets lined with white buildings and red tiled roofs as a pool of sweat grew between my backpack and my sweater.

I ventured on—the noises got louder and louder and I felt less alone, like I had a mission now. I was so focused on finding the music that I almost didn't notice the stares directed my way. But I couldn't blame them for looking. For as out-of-place as I felt, I probably looked ten times more out-of-place than I realized—but it didn't matter. There they were: the band. Four men in suits too big for them were busking on the street, though hardly anybody stopped to listen. I threw a 1 Euro coin in their open violin case, and the man playing guitar looked up, smiled, and nodded.

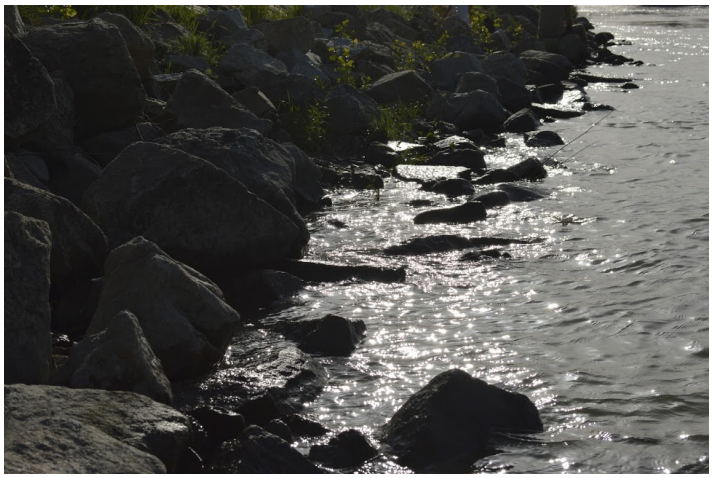
•

120 years ago, another 20 year old wandered the very same streets. Paul Bauer had been born to a poor Austrian family living in Bratislava, which he would've called Pressburg, the old German name for the city. He stared at his feet as he shuffled over the cobblestone. He told

himself he wasn't going to get upset. *The odds of going to war are slim*, he reminded himself. He was going to get in, complete his mandatory service, and then get out, go to America, and send money to his two brothers. Speaking of his brothers, he hadn't yet told them he'd been drafted. He didn't know how. All he knew was that for the first time since he died, he was glad his father wasn't here anymore, glad he wasn't alive to see his own son be shipped off all the way to Berlin to serve some bloodthirsty Kaiser of another nation, a nation he never truly felt was one to which he belonged.

Paul was only 10 when Emperor Wilhelm I died, 3 years after his father had. And then there was his poor son Frederick III who—if he hadn't developed cancer of the throat and died so suddenly—might still be on the throne instead of his hot-headed son, Wilhelm II (Balfour). Paul heard stories about Frederick, about how he couldn't talk or eat. *Imagine*—he thought—*it's finally your turn to be Emperor, and you're dying. Figures.* Could Paul have guessed his own grandson would meet a similar fate? Did he even truly believe that he would make it out of Europe at all? He felt like he was lying to himself, but then again, he didn't have much, and he wasn't about to give up on one of the few things he did have: hope.

When he had finally made it to the shores of the Danube, he sat on a patch of rocks and grass and tried to count as many ships as he could see. He thought about the new Kaiser, his new boss. He didn't know if the stories he'd heard about him were true—



especially the story about him only having half a left arm—but now that he was going to Berlin, he supposed he'd find out for himself. He looked down once more at his feet, focusing in on spots on either shoe where the leather had been worn down completely, exposing his socks in little mirrored holes on the inside of each foot. *Maybe they'll give me new shoes in once I get there*. *Maybe not.* The sun had already set, but he didn't feel like going home. He felt like he'd keep walking for just a little while more.

•

By the late afternoon, I had finally found a youth hostel where I could rent a bed for a week for pretty cheap. At least, I thought I had. A sign posted outside a tall, brick building—in English, thank God—read *Wild Elephant Hostel*, but the stairs only led to closed doors that looked like private apartments. Thankfully, someone around my age who spoke English must've noticed how lost I looked, because he showed me the correct door and led me inside. Before I could even set my backpack down, a booming voice sounded from the little room around the corner, and a man about my age appeared in a red apron that was comically small on him. "Who are you? You eating dinner with us?" he said in an English accent, walking towards me. I was taken aback. He was obviously a little drunk—probably a little too drunk to be cooking over an open flame like he was—but he had a kind face and an infectious smile; he introduced himself as Martyn and asked me to come back to the kitchen and eat with the others.

A short, blonde woman who looked to be about my age was donning an identical red apron, but hers fit almost perfectly. She smiled, looked me up and down and announced to the group of people sitting at the table, "Hey! Another American!" I was embarrassed I could be so easily spotted as such, even though she hadn't heard me speak yet. And before I could say hello, two men, a bit older than the rest of the crowd, came storming in with flushed faces and skin-

tight bicycling shorts. Without saying anything, they took off their helmets and took a shot of whatever clear alcohol was sitting in front of them at the table. I still hadn't said a word. I just stared at one of the men as the sweat dripped off the end of a shock of brown hair plastered to his skull. He looked at me curiously, like I was an alien.

"And who is this?" he said. I couldn't tell if he was addressing me or the group, but he was staring right at me, so I answered.

"I'm Sam."

"Well, hello, Sam." He extended a sweaty palm out to me for a handshake. "Sorry, long ride. We're coming from Vienna. You're not Canadian too, are you?"

"No, American." I had to lean in more closely to hear him. Everyone at the table had erupted into laughter at some joke I missed.

"Hey! Another American!" He pointed to a young man and woman playing cards away from the crowd; the Americans, I guessed. They smiled at me.

"You came all the way from Vienna? How far is that?" I asked.

This time his friend answered: "Not too far, if you have a good bike. There's a path leading all the way here. Haven't you ever been?"

"No" I answered him. Apparently the short blonde woman overheard and gasped in disbelief. She seemed a little drunk, too.

"Oh you *have* to go to Vienna! It's just like here, but prettier!" I nodded and smiled, pretending like I knew where that was. *Austria? Hungary?* The only thing that came to my mind when I heard that word was vague visions of powdered wigs and violins. *Mozart? Was he from there? Or maybe I'm thinking of* The Sound of Music? Underneath the table, I pulled out my phone and opened up Google Maps. *Oh,* I thought, *it is pretty close.*

Too afraid to talk much to the other people there that first night, I spent my dinner looking up Vienna on my phone under the table—the history, the tourist attractions, the nature. It looked beautiful, and I thought, one day, if I could, I might like to visit there.

•

As Paul Bauer settled in to his military conscription in Berlin, another young person—a woman—was up early again on another sunny Saturday morning in Vienna. Leopoldina "Poldy" Vavrinec had wanted to live in in that city her entire life, and now, thanks to the kindness of her great aunt, she could. In exchange for helping her run her business—a quaint fabric store in the heart of downtown—Poldy could stay in the spare bedroom of her apartment. *It won't be for long*, she'd assure herself. *Once I make enough money, I'm leaving. I'm going to America.* And every time Saturday morning rolled around again, she felt closer and closer to that dream.

To Poldy, nothing looked sweeter than a hallway filled with empty wicker baskets on those market-day mornings when the weather was warm. Stringing as many as she could across her arm at once, she always would be one of the first people there, knowing that the rich ladies tipped her best when the flowers, vegetables, and bread were fresh. She didn't even need the lists anymore at this point. She had all of her regular customers' orders memorized: *Half a pound of carrots and two pounds of potatoes for Ms. Kofler; assorted fresh flowers for the Mayrhofer widow; dried plums, chestnuts, onions, and cream for Ms. Wagner and her sister.* When she returned with full baskets and tired arms, the ladies always made sure to thank her and tip her generously. She prided herself on being able to fit in with the socialites, and tried not to think about how she'd never quite be accepted as one.

Living in Vienna was turning out to be just like Poldy imagined it would. Here, nobody knew how poor she was, or that she was an orphan, or that she made her own dresses from the

scrap fabric in her aunt's store because she couldn't afford to buy a pre-made one. Here, no one suspected she was raised in Malacky—a town only about 30 kilometers north of Pressburg—and had little education. But still, in the back of her mind, she knew that once her old aunt finally died, she would have no one here. She certainly couldn't run the business on her own. With no family, no money, and no plan, going to America was starting to seem like her only option. She just had to figure out how to get there.

Poldy as a child (far left) with the Vavrinec family

•

Back in Berlin, Paul Bauer was finishing up his two-year stint in the military. Thankfully, his worries about Europe dissolving into war wouldn't come to fruition for another 12 years, and he spent his days performing menial jobs at the court of the Kaiser—first as a valet, then as a stable boy, and, finally, as a cook. They were all demanding jobs, sure, but he would be lying if he said he wasn't enjoying his time in the court. He grew to like the structure, the routine: regular meals, a regular sleep schedule, a roof over his head. He hated to admit it, but he was quite enjoying his stay.

He was in the stables the evening he received the news, about one year or so into his service. A German soldier approached him from behind as Paul was washing and polishing the horses' brass buckles.

"A letter, for you, from Pressburg." His voice was stern, but sounded odd, like the man was shouting at him from underwater. Paul turned around suddenly to see him holding out a

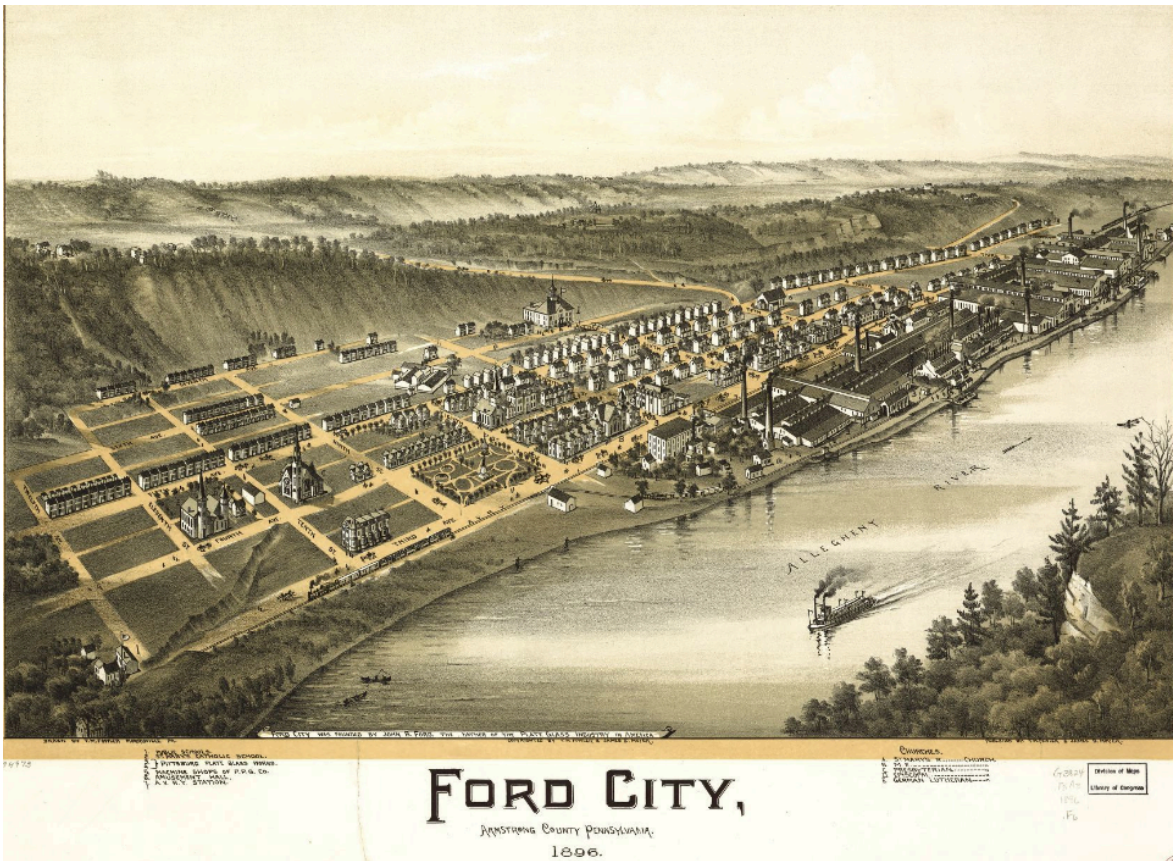
worn envelope towards him with his left hand, and plugging his nose with his right. Paul smiled—he was so used to the odor of the place he had honestly forgotten it existed.

"Thank you, sir." His soiled bare hand touched the black leather glove as the men exchanged the letter between them. Paul tucked it into his pocket and continued polishing. He already knew what it would say. *Your mother is dead.* He couldn't bear to look at it. Who else would be sending him mail all the way from Pressburg? But his thought was interrupted by a horses' whinny that rang out from a few stalls down. *Felix.* He could tell it was him, he knew his voice. That wasn't his real name—none of them really had names—but this horse was his favorite, and, he thought, the smartest of the lot. He walked over to him, ran the back of his hand over the white diamond between his eyes. They looked at each other for just a moment, and then Paul couldn't take the suspense any longer. He pulled the letter out of his pocket and tore into the envelope, not even stopping to read the sender's name. His eyes darted back and forth as he scanned frantically for the word "mother"—*though*, he thought, *why should I care?* After Paul's father died and she remarried, she hardly acknowledged the three boys as her own. That man already had his own children and didn't want any more, especially three rowdy boys that would only cost money to feed and cause trouble. And where was she when Paul's younger sister needed a mother? And where was she when she fell ill, and—*wait. This is not from Pressburg.* He cursed the black-gloved soldier under his breath for giving him a scare like that. *This is from—from, what? Could it be?*

The letter was from Paul's eldest brother, dated one month back. He had made it to America. And not only had he made it, he had a job at a factory making plate glass, and Paul should be expecting to receive money soon so that he could join him. *Where in the world could a poor kid who can't read, write, or speak English get a job?* And then, behind the last page, he

felt a miniature postcard, grabbed its edge and flipped it right-side up. There it was: an image of the place where his brother was. And there they were, the glorious factory buildings and warehouses and smokestacks that were going to finally get them some money, finally get Paul what he had been dreaming about for so many years now.

In 1902, his dream came true. He was on a cargo ship headed for New York, and, ultimately, Ford City, Pennsylvania.



(Fowler and Moyer)

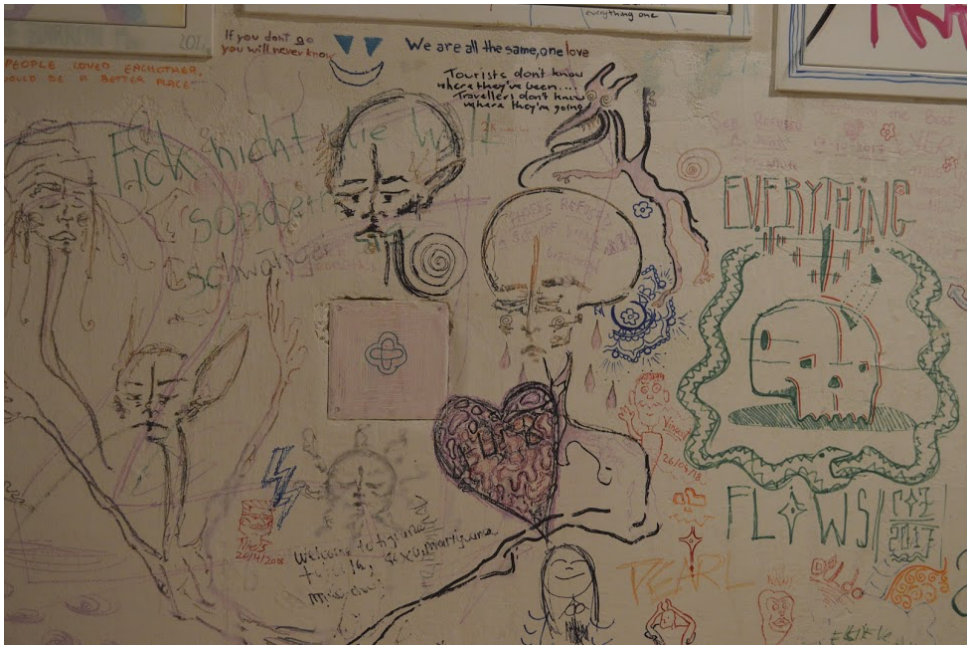
•

"Hey! You never had your Borovička shot. Let me grab you a beer." The voice was coming from Martyn, the kind-faced Englishman still wearing the tiny apron, who I was following up the stairs to what everyone staying at the youth hostel was calling "the attic."

He motioned for me to follow him into another room down the hallway, and he grabbed me a bottle out of a miniature fridge. “Alright, thanks,” I said as I tried to hand him a 50 cent Euro coin. Written in chalk above the bar was a price list, and a Zlatý Bažant—what he had given me—had that price listed after it.

“No, no, no. What are you doing? That’s a gift!” Martyn said, and pushed my coin away.

“Oh, thanks!” I hoped he actually worked there and wasn’t just stealing someone else’s beer, but I put the coin back in my pocket anyway and smiled, happy I had found a hospitable group of people to stay with after a dizzyingly confusing day, and happy that I wasn’t the only English-speaking 20-something-year-old in Bratislava. I took a look at where I was: the bar room was carpeted with 1970s-looking red shag, and the bar itself was shoddily made out of what looked like old wood pallets, a hammer, and nails. The walls in that room—and in all the rooms in the attic, actually—were filled with art left by travelers here before me, and messages were scrawled across every surface in languages I couldn’t recognize.



I even saw that someone had left a drawing of the state of Ohio, filled in with bubble letters reading: “HI FROM COLUMBUS!” My stomach sank as I thought of Grandma and Papa in Toledo. At that time, when the cancer diagnosis was relatively new and he was still receiving radiation therapy, the

family thought he only had a short time to live. And if I were being honest with myself, I knew that I hadn't just traveled to Bratislava to satisfy my own curiosity about my family tree. I hadn't gone to spend hours in some archives collection or library reading through baptism records and marriage certificates. I went because of the memories I had of sun-soaked afternoons in my grandparent's backyard feeding animals, eating ice cream, laughing together. I went because of how excited I used to get when he pulled a lucky silver dollar coin out from behind my ear, and how much fun all of us grandkids would have when he brought out his banjo and sang silly songs with us. I suppose, really, I went because Papa Clem never knew his father's family—which means he never had his own Papa, or Grandma, or any aunts, uncles, or cousins that had been such an important part of my life. I thought—perhaps naïvely—that I could give him some family members' names, some photos of the town where they lived, *something.* In return for all the happy memories Papa created in my life, I figured that searching for these answers was the least I could do; it was something I could give back to him before he passed on. And besides: I, myself, wanted to know everything I could about his roots, his family, and who he was. I decided in that attic on that very night that I was going to do it: I was going to get to the village of Papradno, Slovakia somehow.

•

Somewhere not very far from Bratislava more than a century before that, another 20-year-old was getting ready to embark on a journey—but for her, there would be no return back home. By that time, Poldy Vavrinec had settled into Vienna and found a group of close friends that didn't seem to mind her social status, or her nationality, or her work. By now, she had nearly perfected her German, had a wardrobe filled with elaborate dresses she had sewn herself, and was a master of appearing cosmopolitan. Poldy was one of those young women whom everyone

seemed to know and who seemed to know everyone; when she went to the pubs on lazy afternoons, odds are somebody there would recognize her and buy her a würstchen and a glass of beer. Looking back, those were some of the most carefree days of her life.

Still though, something was gnawing at her—a desire to start over, rise above her lot in life. Her great aunt was getting older every day, and Poldy knew that as she, too, got older, she would need to either marry here or leave for America. Thankfully, her social connections made the latter option fairly simple. Her friends were able to secure her a place to live and a well-paying job as a hotel maid; soon after, they sent her money and a passport to get there.

Her destination? Ford City, Pennsylvania.

•

It is at this point in the story that another Bower makes her entrance—Mary Bower. Though her last name was pronounced the same as Paul's, they bear no relation. Well, that isn't *totally* accurate. I mean, without her, Paul Bauer would've never had a job in Ford City, never met his future wife, Poldy Vavrinec, and never would've had children, grandchildren—or even me, Paul and Poldy's great-great-great granddaughter.

Uneducated and living in destitution, 14-year-old John Ford ran away from his birthplace, Kentucky, to the plains of Indiana, where meeting Mary Bower saved his life as he knew it (Stonehurst 1). His father had never returned from fighting in the War of 1812 when John was just a toddler, and John had reached adulthood with no ability to perform math, writing, or reading. After settling in Indiana, he met Mary Bower; at age 20, he asked her to take his hand in marriage. Together, they helped each other grow, both personally and financially (1). She helped catch up on the schooling he never received, and with those skills he founded various businesses with her and, eventually, a family (1).

Whether by luck, fate, or pure chance, it was their children who would eventually lead them to their fortune when their son, Emory, first brought his parents' attention to the plate glass industry, which was prospering as the public started window shopping, automobiles began needing large glass panes for their windshields, and architectural style started favoring buildings with larger windows (1). However, at that time nearly all plate glass was imported from Europe. Seeing an opportunity, John and his similarly entrepreneurial sons, both Emory and Edward, relocated to Pennsylvania and founded the Pittsburg Plate Glass Company (1). Not only was it a success, but it gave Eastern and Southern European immigrants an opportunity to earn a living and begin their lives in America; soon, PPG was the most profitable glass manufacturer in America. Ford City, named in honor of John, was established on the Allegheny River as a

"Employees spreading plaster over the surface of plate glass at the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company plant in Ford City, Pa." (PPG)

company town surrounding one cluster of PPG's glass factories ("Ford City"). And it was in this tiny city on the river—made up of nothing more than a few blocks of workers' houses and some public buildings—that Papa Clem's family tree found arable soil and began to take root in the New World.

•

When Paul Bauer finally did make it to Ford City, he was hired as a glass grinder and finisher at the plant, and was pleasantly surprised to find himself among so many others who spoke Slovak, German, or both. The skills he had acquired back in Berlin came in handy, too, as he made extra money by driving horses. It was good pay, and it allowed him to meet some of the other young people who had come from Europe in search of work. He tried especially hard not to get attached to them like he did with the Kaiser's horses, but it wasn't easy. It had been two years since he last saw them, and he still found himself getting a lump in his throat whenever he looked at his new horse—this one had a white diamond on his face, just like Felix.

Paul Bauer

It was towards the end of one of Paul's night shifts that he saw a young woman in an expensive-looking dress walking alone. She had dark hair and soft eyes, and she was young. Maybe even younger than him. At this point, the woman sensed he was slowing down his carriage to ask her if she needed a ride, but before he could say anything, she shot a mean look back at him and asked him what he wanted. He was frightened—he'd never talked to a woman who was so bold. And though her German was perfect, he couldn't quite place the accent. He smiled and hesitated for a moment.

"Are you going to ask me if I want a ride? Because I'm not giving you a cent of my money." Paul thought he could detect the hint of a smile while she said it.

"No, miss, I was just wondering if I could get your name." Now she couldn't hold her poker face any longer. She let her face break out into a full grin, and turned away for a second, embarrassed.

"It's Poldy."

•

Within the year, they were married. Not long after, in 1905, they welcomed their first child, Rose. Dissatisfied with the quality of the company homes, Poldy insisted Paul build their own home from the ground up, complete with a fireplace. And they did. It was five years before the coughing started, five wonderful years with two more children and more money than they had ever seen before. But it got worse. As he worked longer days at the factory, what was once a nightly spasm of coughs turned into the total inability to breathe. He could no longer work at the glass plant. He could hardly breathe at all anymore, and when he did, his lungs made a wheezing noise, a little whisper with every painful inhale. When Poldy finally insisted he see the doctor, the prognosis he feared was confirmed: the powder had settled on his lungs. The doctor prescribed fresh, country air, as well as plenty of time outside. So, after only six years of enjoying their new home, the family used all of their savings to purchase 108 acres of farmland outside Ford City.

Poldy Bauer (née Vavrinec)

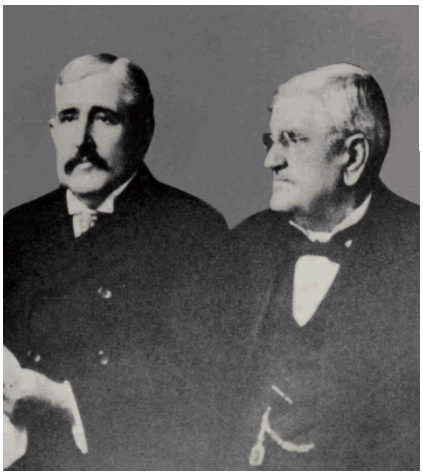
•

Still unsure of how to navigate public transit in Bratislava, the morning I left for Papradno, I walked 4 ½ miles to the train station. By the time I arrived, my hands were covered in so much sweat that my phone's touch screen wasn't even recognizing them as hands. I frantically tried to dry them off and use my Google Translate app to find the correct train platform. *God! Why did I only pack long pants and shirts?* When I did finally manage to get on the right train, the journey took almost exactly an hour to reach the city of Trenčin, about 130 kilometers northeast of Bratislava. After two hours of waiting in a café there for my next train, I

began my next leg of the journey, another hour by train, to Žilina, after which I backtracked to the smaller town of Považská Bystrica. From there, Google Maps could no longer calculate my route. I knew this was coming, so I had a paper map and bus schedule in my pocket. I figured if I got completely lost, I could point to the map I had and get some help finding the stop. Luckily, I spent my hour of waiting for the bus in a nearby pub, almost completely filled with people my age, some of whom knew English and knew where Papradno was. I was on my way.

•

Two years after Josef Vascik was born in the village of Papradno on a frigid December evening, back in Pennsylvania, John Ford's son, Edward, had taken over the role as Pittsburg Plate Glass Company's president. And it might have stayed that way had he not ever crossed paths with John Pitcairn. Pitcairn was a Scottish immigrant, an executive at PPG with brothers Edward and Emory and—in Edward's opinion—completely intolerable. John left the company altogether in 1897 and founded Edward Ford Plate Glass Company on an available plot of land on the Maumee River, directly southeast of the city of Toledo, Ohio two years later ("Syrup"). In a similar vein to what his father had done in Pennsylvania, he established a town for his employees which surrounded the factory and named the place by combining the his surname with his wife's, Ross and Ford. Thus, the city of Rossford, Ohio was born ("Rossford").



(L-R) Edward Ford & his father John Ford

("Syrup")

•

Very little is known about Josef Vascik, Papa Clem's father and my great-grandfather, and his old life in Slovakia. I hoped that visiting Papradno would, if nothing else, give me a

sense of what his childhood and early adulthood must have been like. I gathered and reviewed all my research on him—6 years' worth, at that time—on my phone as I spent the day travelling to Papradno. According to family stories, he left anywhere between 4 and 13 siblings behind in the village went he arrived at Ellis Island in 1913, meaning the people I'd see when I finally made it there might very well be distant cousins. Like many Slovaks in that era, he joined some family members to work in the coal mines in western Pennsylvania, tapping into the rich reserves of natural resources buried at the foot of the Appalachian mountains.

Because he never learned very much English and, according to family members, had a Slovak accent that seemed to only get thicker as he aged, it was difficult for him to communicate about the world in Papradno he'd left behind. What's more, when pressed for information about his relatives, he had trouble understanding why that mattered. He gave vague responses when asked questions about his life in Europe, partly due to the language barrier, but, it seemed, mostly because he didn't care much to discuss it. After his passing, his wife, would later express her frustration for his enigmatic way of speaking about precise family relationships, saying: "This is how they talked. They never told you anything" (Bauer). A 1893 edition of the American newspaper *The Independent* identifies this same tendency, suggesting that extreme pragmatism and seeming disregard for family ties is, at least in part, a cultural phenomenon:

> The Slovaks, in particular, are devoid of humanity. They have a motto: "Dead man no good; save the living." To illustrate: I was present at a coroner's inquest in July, 1891, when it was clearly proven that the dead man was a brother to a certain boarding-house keeper. The latter denied all relationship and even acquaintance, and refused to allow his brother's body to be brought within his door…This is *not* an unusual instance (Rood).

Despite the racist overtones clearly present in this passage—a hallmark of the time period as Eastern Europeans immigrated in unprecedented numbers—the fact that Rood singled out

Slovak-Americans as a group that has a culturally different understanding of heritage and blood relatives cannot be ignored. However, Rood's interpretation of this cultural difference as being a mark of callousness, or evidence that Slovaks are "devoid of humanity," is likely far from accurate. According to Josef's wife, when asked about whether he had any family in the United States, he informed her he had a cousin living the next block over. When asked about the specifics of their relationship, it turned out the man was an old friend and neighbor from Pennsylvania, and had no blood familial relation to him at all. Still, to Joe, he was a cousin. Contrary to Rood's conclusion, it appears to this reader that the Slovak interpretation of family is much wider than the typical interpretation; it is a collection of people bound by love—blood, really, has nothing to do with it.

•

By the time Rose Bauer was a young woman, about the same age as her mother and father when they came to America, her father Paul had long since recovered from his chronic cough, and the family farm was filled with potato fields and orchards of peaches, sweet cherries, and pears. Oh, and horses. Of course there were horses. Paul made sure he had at least one around at all times—ostensibly for plowing, but also because they made great conversationalists. And it was during one of these excursions out on his horse, guiding her so the plow lines were kept straight on the hilly terrain, that he met Josef Vascik. He was young, about his oldest daughter's age, with dark hair and brown eyes, and he wondered what he was doing out there wandering around the farm by himself.

"Are you lost?" he asked, in a way he hoped didn't sound accusatory. T*his kid can't be more than 17,* he thought.

Josef Vascik

"No, sir, sorry, sorry, sir. I'm just walking." Paul felt bad for him. He could hear a thick Slovak accent, so he surprised him by speaking back to him in his own language.

"Listen, have you had lunch? I have a peach orchard right over there with way too many peaches. We can't sell them all. They're bound to rot and get bad. Follow me." And Joe did.

Nearly every Sunday, his only day without a shift in the mines, Joe came up to the farmhouse and visited Paul and the family. At first he showed up because he knew he'd always get something good to eat when he did. But after a while, he asked more and more if he could see their daughter, Rose. It wasn't long before the two were married on the farm, beneath the peach trees.

Josef and Rose (Bauer) Vascik

Eventually, Paul got Josef—who preferred the more typical American spelling of his name after a while, *Joseph*—a job at the glass plant in Ford City. And when the plant shut down and the jobs left, so too did Paul and Poldy Bauer and the family, along with Joe and Rose Vascik and their budding family. There was work to be had at the Edward Ford Plate Glass Company, out farther West in somewhere called Rossford, Ohio. Rose stayed back for a few months while Joe saved up enough money to secure a place to live, and when she was 23 years old, she took her two toddlers and joined him. She would be in that house for 74 more years after that.

Eventually, that home in Rossford is where Papa Clem, their only son and my grandfather, would be born and raised. And long after that, even after Joe had died and the

factory had closed, Rose spent the remainder of her life there with her firstborn daughter, Jane, whom she had brought to Ohio as a toddler all those years ago. They traveled the world together. I didn't know it at the time, but they had even travelled to Papradno, Slovakia.

•

When I finally reached Papradno, it was nearly 10:00 at night, and I went straight to my room in the small bed and breakfast I had made a reservation at a few days before. There were no streetlights, no way of seeing any of the town's buildings or natural scenery. But I did hear the river. It was a tiny river, but it was loud. It was the first thing I noticed, as it ran straight through the middle of the town. Much like Rossford, or Toledo, or Ford City, it was the center of everything there, and I imagined the sound of it flooded into people's homes 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It got everywhere, even in places you didn't know were there before.

The next morning, I was awakened by the sound of a rooster's crowing. I put my head out the window and listened to the village. In the daytime, there were three constant sounds instead of one: the chickens, the river, and the distant bleating of sheep grazing on the hillsides.

It was a narrow, sleepy town, set down in a valley and flanked on both sides by grassy hills. Then, suddenly, the fourth and sound came: church bells ringing. *I forgot, it's Sunday.* I leaned out a little more and looked at the streets below me—everyone and their mother was walking towards the church. And I mean that literally—I spotted a woman who couldn't have been younger than 90 years old dressed up head-to-toe in her best clothes, creeping ever so slowly towards the sound of the bells with the support of her walker and a

young woman beside her. I looked at the houses; some were fairly large and new, some were made of cinderblocks with sagging roofs held together with duct tape, but most were modest, rectangular, single-story homes packed closely together. I kept scanning the place for some other building besides a house or the church, until my eyes landed on something that made me think of Papa Clem and smile: an ice cream stand.

I walked downstairs and made small talk as best I could with the woman who ran the B&B. Thankfully, she knew a little English, but not much. I wrote down the name *Vascik* on a scrap of paper and handed it to her, trying to ask her if she knew anyone in this town with that name. I sensed her English wasn't quite good enough to understand me, and my attempt at using Google Translate to speak Slovak wasn't quite working out—but, when she read that name, the way her face lit up immediately told me she recognized it. She wrote it again below my note, fixing my spelling.

Vaščik, it read.

I knew I couldn't meet any living Vaščiks, especially since I couldn't speak the language. And in a farming town where everyone knew each other, I had no way to prove who I said I was, and that I came purely on a mission to trace my family tree. But I knew all of that going in. Honestly, that small moment of recognition was all I needed, and all I really came for.

•

In the end, my trip to Papradno led me no closer to any of the answers I thought I was seeking—a name of his siblings, his parents, an old address. Nothing. But the more I thought about it, any attempt to find black-and-white answers about the facts of his personal life in the Old World would not only be incredibly difficult, but it may not have been what he would have wanted. When Rose Bauer and her daughter Jane visited Papradno, for example, Joe was invited to come along and see his hometown again, but refused.

Kostol sv. Ondreja (St. Andrew's Church) in Papradno. Photo taken by Rose Bauer, 1975. Both Josef and Rose donated funds to pay for the priest's vestment shown here.

Though I never met my great grandpa Joe, through the process of interviewing family members who knew him for this project, it is abundantly clear that he dearly loved and was treasured by the family he created and the friends he had here. It is for this reason I leave Joe Vascik's past up for interpretation; I hope I have done my part in preserving his legacy, yet honoring the mysteries he hoped to keep hidden.

•

I'm not the first—and I won't be the last—to look to the past for stories of resilience when I need inspiration to cope with difficult times. My ancestors faced trials I can't imagine enduring in order to give me the freedom and privileges I have today, and I hope by sharing their stories, I can give them an iota of the gratitude they are owed. Regarding these "difficult times," I'm speaking, of course, about the coronavirus pandemic that humanity is currently fighting. Though scientists around the globe know much more about COVID-19 now than they did a few short months ago when the outbreak began, nobody can guess how this situation will evolve. People across the planet are living through a time of deep uncertainty and grief. But, at the same time, I have seen some of the most powerful demonstrations of sacrifice, specifically from healthcare workers who put their lives on the line to help others. I've seen people express to those close to them how much they love them, and express regret that they don't tell them enough. I've seen how unbreakable the human spirit can be, and how much generosity and kindness each of us has to share. Maybe it's my Catholic upbringing speaking, or maybe it's the fact that I can't stop thinking about Papa Clem's birthday happening on Easter this year, but I believe it is possible for light to come from darkness, and life to sprout from death.

Works Cited

Balfour, Michael Graham. “William II: Emperor of Germany.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 2020, https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-II-emperor-of-Germany

“Ford City, Pennsylvania.” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 11 April 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ford_City,_Pennsylvania

Holshue, Michelle L., et al. "First Case of 2019 Novel Coronavirus in the United States." N Engl J Med, vol. 382, no. 10, 2020, pp. 929-936, https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMoa2001191, doi:10.1056/NEJMoa2001191.

Rood, Henry. "THE COAL MINERS OF PENNSYLVANIA." The Independent...Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts (1848-1921), vol. 45, no. 2301, Jan 05, 1893, pp. 4. ProQuest, https://login.ezproxy-eres.up.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy-eres.up.edu/docview/90435170?accountid=14703.

“Rossford, Ohio.” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 17 April 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rossford,_Ohio.

“Syrup Off the Roller: The Libbey-Owens-Ford Company,” University of Toledo, 2012, https://www.utoledo.edu/library/canaday/exhibits/oi/OIExhibit/Syrup.htm

“The Stonehurst and the Schlotman Family,” The Grosse Pointe Historical Society and The Wilkinson Foundation. https://www.gphistorical.org/stonehurst/index.html

Vascik (née Bauer), Rose Cecilia. Recorded personal interview by Gail Hogan (née Vascik). 1988.

Images Cited

Fowler, T. M, and James B Moyer. *Ford City, Armstrong County, Pennsylvania*. [Morrisville, Pa., T. M. Fowler & James B. Moyer, 1896] Map. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/75694973/>.

PPG Industries. Retrieved from the Digital Public Library of America <http://historicpittsburgh.org/islandora/object/pitt:20170227-hpichswp-0006>."

All other images were photographs taken by the author or scanned from the personal photo collections of Rose Cecilia Vascik (Bauer) and Mary Beth Stevenson (Vascik).

Works Referenced

Stevenson (née Vascik), Mary Beth. Personal interview by Sam Leicht. 2020.

World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918." Database with images. *FamilySearch*. http://FamilySearch.org : 27 April 2020. Citing NARA microfilm publication M1509. Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.